

# Protection Sought for L.A.'s Easy Prey

After two men on skid row are beaten, police and advocates sharpen their focus on meeting the needs of elderly and sick homeless people.

By CARLA RIVERA  
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The recent baseball bat beatings of two homeless men while they slept on downtown Los Angeles sidewalks has spurred police and advocates to look for better ways to safeguard the city's homeless.

Los Angeles police believe the two 19-year-old suspects may have committed similar assaults downtown. Investigators are searching through crime reports and past complaints to determine if other attacks fit the pattern, Det. Elizabeth Avila said.

Meanwhile, police who patrol skid row said they are more alert to the need to protect elderly and sick homeless people who might present easy targets.

Advocates are studying such remedies as increasing lighting at some intersections, adding beds in downtown shelters and adapting services for homeless people who have resisted help.

"We have to nip in the bud any idea that it's open season on homeless people," said Ricky Mantley, an organizer with the Los Angeles Community Action Network, at a recent meeting of advocates for the homeless. "It seems homeless people are now on the list for mean, feckless young men to prove their manhood."

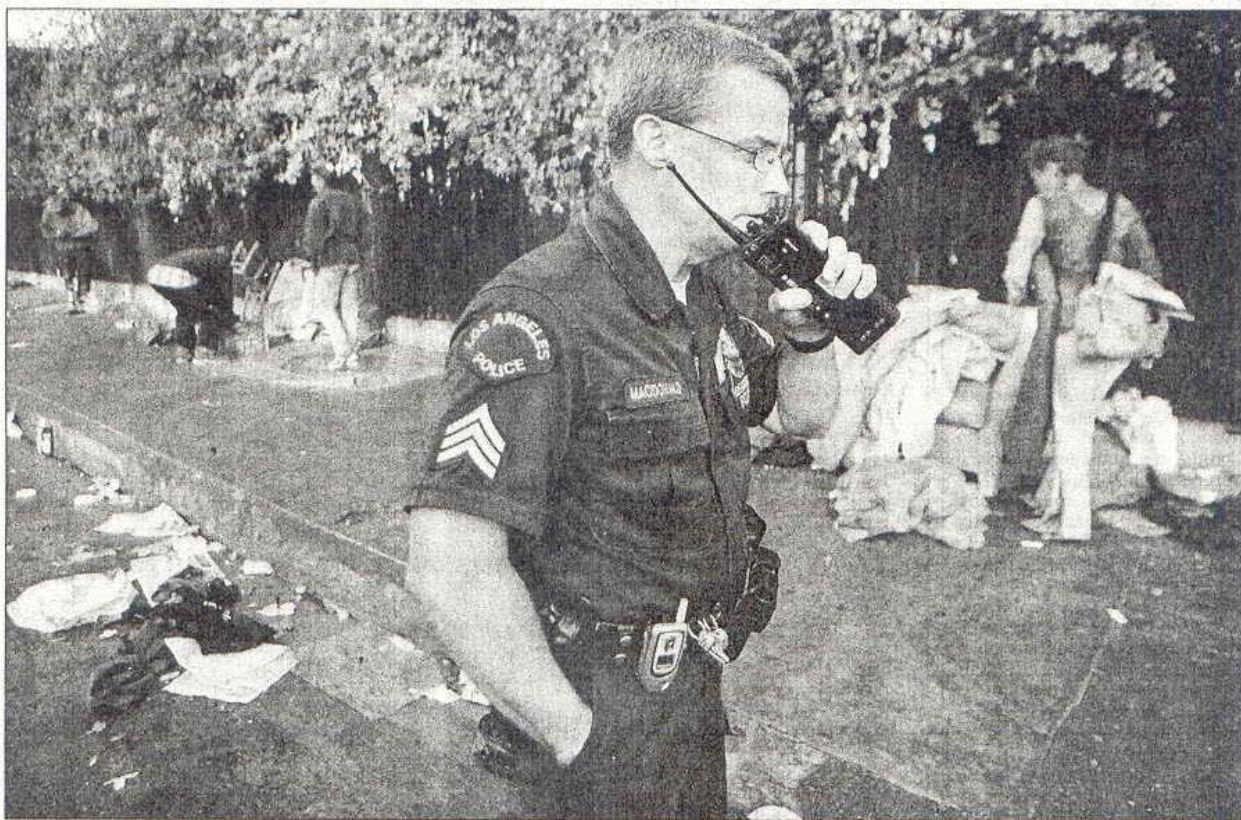
For advocates, many of whom are homeless or were once homeless, the beatings are a grim reminder that street people are preyed on by fellow transients and outsiders who go to skid row to steal, deal drugs or, as is alleged in the recent incidents, simply to make mischief.

Homeless people who avoid skid row's gritty streets are not immune: In Hollywood, for example, they say they stay clear of sidewalks after parties and when clubs close to avoid being kicked and spit on for sport.

The Aug. 16 attacks on the two skid row men have inspired particular outrage because one of the victims, Ernest Adams, 55, was a beloved fixture at his spot near the 3rd Street tunnel at Flower Street. He suffered such severe head injuries that initially he was not expected to live. He remains at County-USC Medical Center in critical but stable condition.

Despite the affection some downtown office workers and residents had for Adams, little is known about his past.

There is also little information about victim Gerald McHenry, 38, who was hit on the arm about 2 a.m. while sleeping on a sidewalk near 9th and Wall streets. His attacker fled in a car. McHenry walked to the Los An-



**ON PATROL:** Sgt. James MacDonald of the LAPD Central Division's Eastside detail walks through skid row early in the morning. Police say recent attacks in the area have made them more alert to the needs of elderly and sick homeless people who sleep on the streets. Photographs by FRANCINE ORR Los Angeles Times



**VULNERABLE:** A homeless person huddles under a blanket. Among improvements being studied is expansion of shelters.

geles Police Department's Central Division station at 6th Street and Maple Avenue and filed a report.

Police said they were unable to find McHenry after that for several days but caught up with him Thursday, when he gave them a more detailed statement. The Aug. 16 attacks, police officials said, were apparently inspired by a video called "Bum-fights," which shows homeless people and alcoholics fighting for money or beer.

Two 19-year-old men, Justin Edward Brumfield of Los Angeles and William Alexander Orantes of Inglewood were charged Aug. 18 with attempted murder and assault. They pleaded not guilty and were ordered held in lieu of \$1-million bail each. Brumfield and Orantes told

investigators they bought the video at a swap meet for \$10 several months ago. They said they thought the video was "funny" and decided to target downtown's homeless population, Det. Avila said.

In several trips downtown, Brumfield and Orantes told police, they alternated as passenger and driver, with the driver acting as a lookout and the passenger committing assaults. Investigators said Brumfield allegedly wielded the bat during the most recent assaults, while Orantes waited in the car.

Police believe there was a third victim that night, still unidentified.

The suspects don't fit the profile of criminals, Avila said. Neither had a police record and both had good jobs, had graduated

from El Segundo High School and came from stable families.

Homeless people and their advocates said they hoped the attacks would lead to a new awareness of safety issues among downtown's homeless.

Louis McElway, 52, who said he has been homeless for 13 years, stays on a troubled stretch of Gladys Avenue downtown. He said he has been stabbed and has chased away people bent on stealing his belongings, so he said the recent attacks did not inspire any particular fear in him.

In Hollywood, homeless people must frequently dodge kicks, especially after raves, said Rabbit, a member of the Hollywood Community Action Network who uses only one name.

"Everyone is stoked and looking for something to get into," he said. When you're homeless, "every second you're thinking about how you're going to survive or whether this man coming down the street is going to try to kill me."

On a recent patrol of the Central Division's Eastside detail, which polices skid row, officers noticed an apparently confused, disheveled and shaking elderly man who looked lost. It turned out he had a home in Hollywood and was wanted on an outstanding traffic warrant. Although the offense seemed slight, the officers took him into custody.

"The only reason I'm doing this is because in another hour, he's going to be the victim of something," said the lead officer,

Sgt. James MacDonald. "I'd be neglectful if I just left him sitting here."

Women, the mentally ill and the elderly, who are an increasing component of downtown's homeless population, are especially vulnerable, said Capt. Andrew J. Smith, Central Division commanding officer. And downtown, the criminal element can blend with ease into the transient population, he said.

Smith said his officers are stepping up narcotics enforcement and are working with the district attorney's and city attorney's staffs to seek legislation making downtown a narcotics recovery zone, which would lead to stiffer sentences for drug crimes committed there.

Some homeless people apparently are taking security into their own hands. Andy Bales, executive director of the Union Rescue Mission, said his agency has recently confiscated more knives and other weapons from homeless people seeking shelter or other services.

Orlando Ward, a spokesman for the Midnight Mission, said it might be tough to dispel the perception — apparently one that fed the recent assaults — that on skid row anything goes.

"There's a deeper message that these people's lives are not worth protecting or honoring," said Ward, whose agency is hoping to expand its Operation Safe Sleep overnight shelter. "And we all share the blame, as we have allowed skid row to fall into lawlessness."





Photographs by FRANCINE ORR *Los Angeles Times*

## Constant Struggle to Find a Safe Place

*Shawn Robertson, 53, above, is homeless and says that even though he is 6 feet 1, he curls up in a shopping cart so he won't get a ticket for sleeping on the sidewalk. At right, Joel Beason, 67, also homeless, is helped to his feet by LAPD Officer Armando Alvarez. The recent baseball bat beatings of two homeless men while they slept on downtown Los Angeles sidewalks has spurred police and advocates to look for better ways to safeguard the city's homeless. **B4***

